

Factors in social interaction in cohousing communities

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Abstract

Cohousing communities can be considered alternatives for living independently in old age. However, currently the factors that influence the success of these communities are unclear. Based on literature and case studies gathered by students a new interaction-model was created that shows the relevant factors on an individual level. Based on the results it was concluded that physical design factors influence social interactions in a cohousing communities and that both age and the set of values, goals and behaviour of the individual are important factors. The influence of new 'aware' technology needs to be considered in future research.

Keywords

Social interaction, cohousing communities, model, physical environment.

Introduction

Cohousing has gained renewed interest in the Netherlands with the population of over 50 years of age as alternative for professional and family care in combination with living independently. In these communities people have the possibility to share daily life activities in a specially developed facility. These facilities comprise of multiple dwellings (20-30) that are oriented around a common open area and a common building (Durrett, 2005). In such a community there is no condition of management. People are all equally responsible for the organisation of the community.

Living in a cohousing community means that the social context and the organisation of the physical environment are significantly different than living in a regular neighbourhood. As soon as people attend such a community they are faced with a change in both formal and informal social interactions. These effects sometimes result in a negative experience. This study concentrates on establishing whether the problems occurring nowadays can be partly controlled or even solved by the physical characteristics. For this it is vital to first establish the social and other related aspects that influence social interactions in a cohousing community.

Several studies on the physical aspects of cohousing dwellings and buildings show that aspects like proximity of the dwellings, the position towards other houses, buffer zones between private and general space, surveillance within the community and shared pathways affect social interactions in the community (Hillier and Hanson, 1984; Fleming et al., 1985; Cooper Marcus and Sarkissian, 1986; Gehl, 1987; Durrett, 2005; Williams,

2005; Baum & Valins, 1977; Abbu-Gazze, 1999). Physical characteristics only have a static influence on interactions which might limit the influence on the social factors. The influence of home technology on social interactions in a cohousing community has not been regarded. While future domotics appliances which might be context-aware, networked and pro-active (Vastenburg, 2007) could be interesting for their (possible) dynamic influence on social interactions.

Social interaction relates to social wellbeing. Social wellbeing is depending on the network of personal relationships and social exchanges that take place (de Jong Gierveld, 1998). When this network is included in a shared social network with forms of reciprocity and trustworthiness this can be seen as social capital (Portes, 1998; Putnam 2007). The cohousing community can provide such a network for its residents.

It is generally assumed that cohousing will lead to an increase in social interactions and this is also established in research (Torres-Antonini, 2001; Williams, 2005; Brenton, 1998). However, this only counts for people that are socially “able”. People with problems in social interactions will not fit in the current set up of cohousing as these require a pro-community and pro-socializing attitude. Unfortunately, in the Netherlands most of dwellings in cohousing communities are owned by housing associations, which often not select for personal characteristics. This puts the community at risk of problematic interactions and social wellbeing.

Even when people are selected for their social abilities when entering a cohousing community this attitude might change over years, since interest in social interaction is negatively affected by age. Activity patterns, for instance in the daily life, become more focused on the home and local environment in later stages of old age. Diversity dominates in the early stages of late adulthood and convergence in the latest stage (Drooglever Fortuin et al., 2006). This change makes it more difficult to foster the network (reciprocity) and keep it stable,

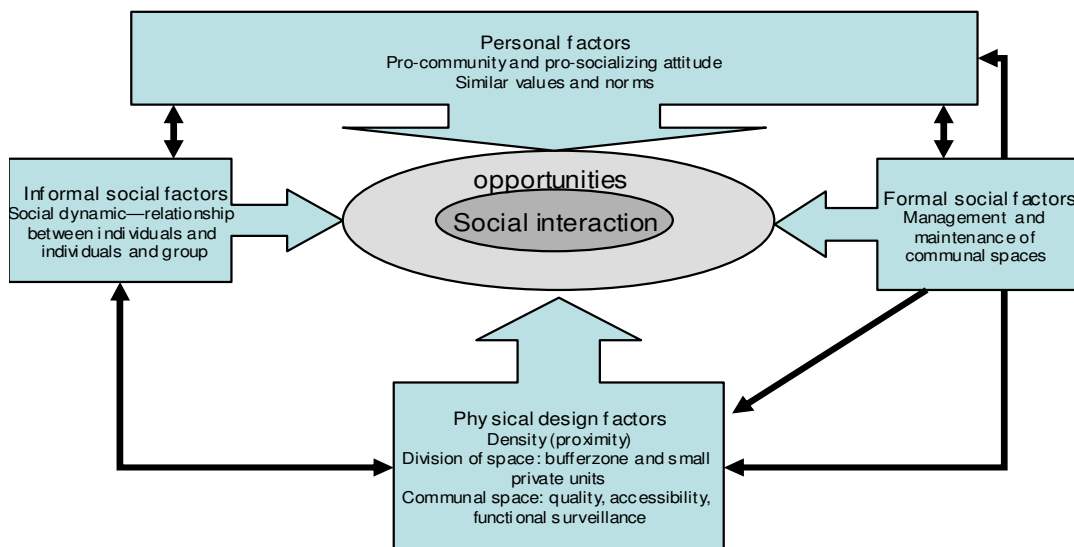


Figure 1: The interaction between design, personal and social factors in a cohousing community and its impact on social interaction (Williams, 2005)

Another aspect of cohousing communities that is known to be of relevance is the distinction between formal and informal interaction. In cohousing people are confronted with formal interactions (e.g. about the organisation of the community) within their household. This brings increasing stress to people with increasing age and sometimes leads to withdrawal of residents from the community in the long term (Williams, 2005).

An important model by Williams (2005), presented in figure 1, shows social interactions in cohousing communities. Interactions on the individual level are not represented. It seems relevant to study the individual interactions as this might show more ways to control the current problems in interactions in cohousing communities in the Netherlands. This paper presents a model about the influential factors on the individual level and the relation towards physical characteristics.

Method and materials

The study was performed in two directions. Firstly information about social interaction and influencing factors was derived from literature. Secondly several student projects were performed that concentrated on the social and physical characteristics of five cohousing communities.

The students performed semi-structured interviews with twelve residents of cohousing communities and collected photographs of the buildings and common areas of five cohousing communities in the northern part of the Netherlands. The residents were chair persons or other members of the boarding group of the community. All dwellers in the communities of this study are originally from the Netherlands. The education of dwellers varies from primary school to university and the professional background from housewives, farmers to higher management. From the interviewed members of the cohousing communities ten out of twelve attended higher education (bachelor and masters degree). Most interviewed consider themselves active residents although having small physical problems.

The communities differ in size and starting dates: community A has 26 apartments and started 15 years ago; community B has 24 apartments and started 12 years ago; community C has 49 apartments and started 5 years ago; community D has 21 apartments and started 22 years ago; community E has 65 apartments and started 8 years ago. A characteristic of all cohousing communities was the use of consensus in decision making.

Results

The results presented below concentrate on the factors that were relevant according to literature.

Ageing factors: Three communities report of problems with the ageing of residents. Some activities had to be stopped (a common kitchen garden in A) and two communities (B and D) undertake actions in order to get younger people in the community.

Conflicts and informal factors: Variation in the original living area was mentioned as threshold for personal contact and open discussion. This was mentioned in both communities A and B. In all cohousing communities conflicts between dwellers have

occurred. Most conflicts were solved by interference of the chair person and the community board, sometimes with help from the housing association.

Formal factors: Cohousing communities always have one or more sets of codes, rules of agreements that affect the behavior of individual members (Meltzer, 2005). One of the cohousing communities (B) didn't have any agreements in the beginning. No clear rules of what could be expected from new dwellers and no member recruitment and selection process. According to the interviewed dwellers community sense was very low in the beginning. It took much effort in organizing and bringing discussion into the group.

Selecting on values goals and behavior: All interviewed dwellers reveal the importance of an election committee, but they have different approaches: from activity involvement (in a 'friends of the community' group in B and D) to selection interviews with a special committee (A and C). One community member (from A) reports that it is very difficult to say no to new dwellers because the housing association is not willing to accept unrented apartments.

Physical design factors: All cohousing communities have adopted several 'social contact design' principles (Williams, 2005) like for instance common facilities and shared pathways. Two communities are larger than expected from literature (49 en 65 apartments). These communities are multi-floored buildings with the use of a central atrium which provides for inter-resident contacts in all weather conditions. Furthermore four of five communities have home technology, like safety systems for entering the building. One community (C) has very strict rules to which people can enter the community.

Based on the results a model for individual interaction is configured (see figure 2).

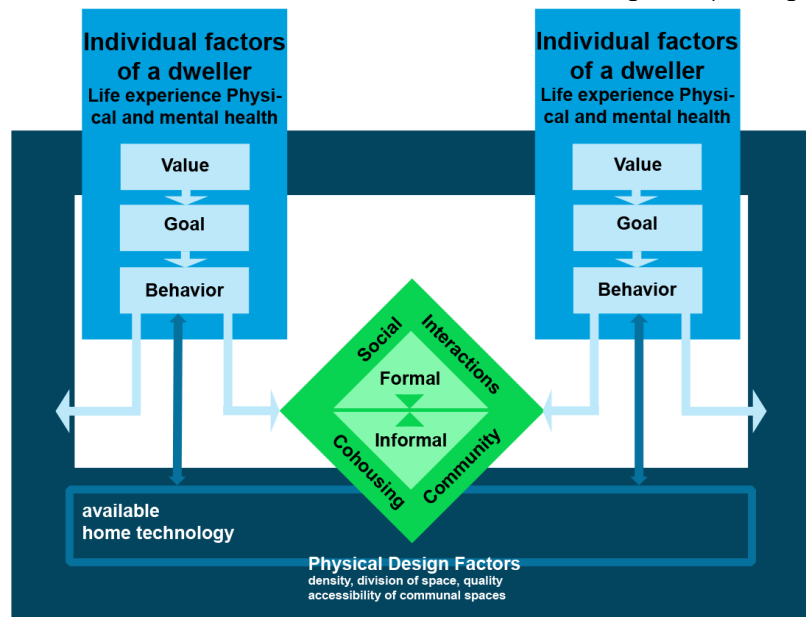


Figure 2: Factors influencing social interactions in a cohousing community for elderly on an individual level. Physical design factors influence social interactions in a static way, while home technology can influence interactions in a dynamic way. Goals and values play an important part in the behaviour of people in general and are represented as a means-end chain of behaviour (Antonides and Van Raay, 2002). The ageing factors have been operationalized in life experience, mental and physical health. The informal factors are the social dynamic relationships between individual dwellers and the formal factors are the management and organisation of the community.

Discussion and conclusions

The conducted research is not representative for all residents of the cohousing communities studied, because the respondents were all chair people or board members. Still the results are in line with previous research from Brenton (1998) who performed a study on cohousing for elderly in the Netherlands.

In the model the linkage between the different values, goals and behaviour of different members in a cohousing community is introduced. Putnam and Pool (1987) stated that conflicts are often related to the perception of interference with the personal goals, aims, and values. When analysing the backgrounds of the reported conflicts in communities this finding is confirmed by several other researches (Brenton, 1998; Meltzer, 2005; Williams, 2005). Conflicts are a relevant item for cohousing as was also found in this research. Therefore, it can be stated that tuning values, goals and aims of inhabitants as well as conflict control need attention.

In relation to this both Williams (2005) and Brenton (1998) describe the importance of self-selection and recruitment. In case of the Dutch situation, with the involvement of housing associations which excludes selection at the entrance, the struggle with non-fitting inhabitants is almost imminent. For that matter Renz (2008) points at the important role of (differences in) values in the identification of criteria for evaluating possible solutions. She argues that dweller should discuss these differences with each other. This supports the introduction of the values in our model.

Compared to the extensive study from Williams (2005) on social interactions in cohousing communities for a more general target group (singles, couples with children) in the United States, new factors for cohousing for elderly have been found. Especially the influence of aging residents on social interactions is important. Activity involvement of elderly is decreasing by years (Drooglever Fortuin et al., 2006). In one community activities have been stopped due to ageing residents. For the older communities it is hard to attract younger people. This is why it was found necessary to mention age effects in the model.

New physical design aspects like home technology and the use of atriums have been observed in the newer communities. From this study no conclusions can be drawn on what influence these changes may have on social interactions.

Supported by literature on cohousing the following can be concluded:

- Social interactions are influenced by the physical characteristics of a cohousing communities
- The difference between values, goals and behaviours of different dwellers of a cohousing community are helpful for a better understanding of social interactions in a cohousing community for the elderly.

The relation of future technologies that are context-aware, networked and pro-active (Vastenburg, 2007) with social interactions should be considered because of the dynamic adaptation of this technology on individual needs.

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